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MEMO

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From: Laura Kadwell, Director for Ending Long-Term Homelessness

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Long-term Homeless Definition and Selection Criteria

As you know, a number of questions are arising with regard to the allocation of units designated for people experiencing long-term homelessness. There are questions about the definition (e.g. Does a person who is "doubled up" meet the definition of long-term homeless?) and there are questions about selecting people for units being funded through the RFP process. The purpose of this memo is both to provide added perspective on the initiative to end long-term homelessness and then to answer some of your questions. The memo builds on the information shared by Cherie Shoquist in her memo of July 15, 2004.

The memo addresses the following questions:

- What is long-term homelessness (LTH)?
- What is "episodic homelessness"?
- How is "transitional housing" regarded in determining LTH?
- How will the MHFA select proposals focused on households experiencing LTH?

There may be further questions regarding the selection of specific households to be served in LTH funded housing. We will address those issues at another time.

What is a household experiencing long-term homelessness?

A household experiencing long-term homelessness is defined in our Business Plan and in the Housing Trust Fund rule as a household "lacking a permanent place to live, continuously for a year or more or at least four times in the past three years." We note that "household" includes an individual, family or youth¹ and that any period of institutionalization or incarceration is excluded when determining the length of time a household has been homeless.

¹ For purposes of this document, "youth" means unaccompanied minor.

As we have teased out the meaning of this language, we have determined that the following households meet the definition of long-term homeless:

- A person, family or youth who has been living on the streets or in shelter for a year or more²
- A person, family or youth who has been on the streets or in shelter at least four times in the past three years
- A person, family or youth who has been “couch hopping” for at least a year (moving from one place to another with no permanent place to stay). Note: if a person has been staying with the same family or friend – even if for a year or more -- the person is not considered “homeless” as the person’s living situation is considered to be stable.

A number of factors will be weighed to determine whether a person, family or youth who has four or more episodes of couch hopping in the past three years will be considered LTH (see below).

What is “episodic homelessness”?

To determine what constitutes an “episode” for the purpose of defining LTH, we need first to realize that the reason for having an episodic as well as a durational definition is that people who go in and out of homelessness are likely experiencing the same barriers to housing as those who are homeless for a long period of time. We want to define “episodic homelessness” such that we identify households that will likely be successfully housed only if they have sufficient supports.

Defining and counting episodes of homelessness is not an exact science. Some indicators that will help to determine whether or not a household is experiencing LTH include:

- The household cycles in and out of shelters. If the household has been to shelters, then left the shelter for housing, then returned to a shelter (4 times in 3 years or fewer), the household is experiencing LTH, regardless of the length of each stay at the shelter.
- The household has 4 or more episodes (in 3 years) of living on the streets. Again, regardless of the length of time on the streets, the household is experiencing LTH.
- It is more difficult to determine whether a household that is couch-hopping is LTH under the episodic definition. Clearly, a person who stays overnight with relatives on 4 separate occasions in 3 years is not homeless. To determine whether a person who couch hops is homeless, we will look over a 3-year period at:
 - Length of time in each living situation
 - Length of time living in permanent housing
 - Reasons for leaving one living situation for another
 - Total duration of “homelessness”
 - Whether the person or family returned to the same “home” more than once during the period of couch hopping.

How is “transitional housing” regarded in determining LTH?

² Time spent in an institution or similar establishment (mental institution, chemical dependency treatment center, rule 36 facility, adult foster care, refugee camp, prison or jail) does not “count” as time housed or time homeless. If, for example, a person is homeless for eight months, then spends four months in an institution, the person does not meet the definition of long-term homeless upon exit. However, the person will meet the definition if he/she then is homeless for an additional four months.

Many questions about the definition of long-term homelessness have to do with the status of people in transitional housing.³ After much deliberation, we have decided that people in transitional housing will be treated like people in any other institution. That is, if a person would meet the LTH definition without the time in transitional housing, the person will be treated as LTH. If the person does not meet the LTH definition without the time in transitional housing, the person is not LTH.

For example, if a person in transitional housing (for any length of time) wants to move to LTH housing, we will look at whether the person met the definition before entering transitional housing. We will view the time in transitional housing as if it did not exist for purposes of determining LTH eligibility.

We considered a number of other options, including that of assessing people in transitional housing to determine whether they would be better served by permanent supportive housing. We decided the following: (1) If people can be better served by permanent supportive housing and they do not meet the LTH definition, they should be served in “regular” permanent supportive housing, not housing developed for people with LTH. (2) We do not want to encourage people to enter transitional housing in order to be assessed for LTH housing.

In deciding how broadly to interpret the LTH definition, we need to be mindful of the goal of the business plan: to end long-term homelessness. We know the LTH population is among the hardest to serve. It is, therefore, critical that we direct developers and service providers to the target population and assist them in every way we can to serve people who truly meet the LTH criteria.

How will the MHFA select proposals focused on households experiencing LTH?

As Cherie indicated in her earlier memo, to achieve the goal of ending long-term homelessness by 2010, resources must be focused on the 4,000 households identified in the Business Plan. The 2003 Wilder Survey identified 3,300 individuals, youth and families who meet the definition. Wilder included people living on the streets and in temporary shelter, as well as people in transitional housing who had not received recent care for a serious health condition.⁴ The Plan calls for the funding of 4,000 supportive housing opportunities to address the needs of those counted by Wilder, allowing for some growth in the total over the coming six years.

The question then becomes: “How will the State focus resources on the 4,000 households identified in the Business Plan?” The agency is taking or considering the following steps to accomplish this objective:

Educate providers on the definition (with all its nuances about couch hopping, transitional housing, etc.). We will do this by elaborating on the first part of this memo

³ Transitional housing means “a project that has as its purpose facilitating the movement of homeless individuals and families to permanent housing within a reasonable amount of time (usually 24 months).”

⁴ The rationale is that people who are receiving treatment or other necessary services are likely to be successful moving directly from transitional housing to permanent housing without supports. People who are not receiving treatment for their health conditions are more likely to need supportive housing when they leave transitional housing.

and publishing it on the website so providers know the population they will be required to serve and through the training sessions we will be conducting very shortly.

- Require providers requesting project funds to describe how prospective residents will be referred to the proposed housing and who will verify their housing status (i.e. long-term homeless). (These requirements are currently part of the RFP Supportive Housing Narratives). We also ask for a service plan, which we can then evaluate as part of the proposal review process.

Develop a guide for providers and developers to use in selecting tenants for the projects. The guide would cover information on topics such as:

- Priorities for tenant selection. If we want providers to select a person on the streets over a person who is couch hopping, this is the place to clarify that preference.
- Referral and verification of homelessness. We will clarify what is expected in the way of referral and verification forms.
- What happens if a LTH person loses his/her LTH housing?

We will continue to clarify the LTH definition and its usage. Please contact me at 651-284-0079 if you have suggestions or questions.